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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the changes in instruction needed to make the transition to teaching an online course. It discusses both traditional and alternative teaching methods a first-time online instructor might choose to use. The advantages and disadvantages of online courses are explored through a review of the literature, and ways in which online instruction differs from traditional instruction are discussed with reference to course guidelines, student interaction, the role of the instructor, and the process of evaluation. Some alternative approaches that may be useful in online teaching are asynchronous (time independent) text-based discussion, collaboration, problem-based learning, and approaches based on the constructivist paradigm. (Contains 41 references.) (SLD)

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Making the Transition to Teaching Online:

Strategies and Methods for the First-time, Online Instructor

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discover what changes an instructor must make to transition to teaching an online course and to present both traditional and alternative teaching methods which the first time, online instructor might choose to use. Through a review of literature published in the last five years, the advantages and disadvantages of online courses will be analyzed followed by a discussion of how course guidelines, student interaction, the role of the instructor, and the process of evaluation is different in online courses. Then the use of traditional teaching methods of lecture and discussion in online courses will be reviewed followed by a presentation of the alternative methods of collaboration, and constructivism.

Introduction

The use of technology is on the rise throughout the United States and the world. Computers and the internet have affected every aspect of life, including education. Almost 90% of institutions with enrollments of 10,000 or more are offering some form of web-based education (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). The number one reason that distance learning is on the rise is that learners have access to the Internet because connections and browsers are widely available (Lansdell, 2001). Currently, multiple courses and even entire programs are being offered via the internet. According to Webb (2001), who directed a study of adult learning style preference and the effectiveness of web-based courses, ignoring the internet is no longer an option for universities if they plan to participate in the lifelong learning market.

Greenwood (2000) conducted a study that examined organizational and individual change in higher education and reveals that the teaching methodology of faculty members in higher education has changed as a result of the incorporation of computer technology. For the instructor who has never taken or taught an online course, making the methodological change can be a daunting and challenging task. Before choosing to teach a course online, the instructor must understand the advantages and disadvantages of online classes. Then, the instructor must be aware that online courses require specific guidelines, designed interactions, revamped instructor role, and retooled evaluations along with appropriate instructional design. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the changes that an instructor needs to make to transition to teaching online and to present traditional and alternative online teaching methods, which the first time, online instructor might choose to use. Through a review of literature published in the last five years, advantages and disadvantages, guidelines, interaction, evaluation and the instructor's role will be discussed. Then, the use of the traditional teaching methods of lecture and discussion in online

courses will be reviewed. Finally, alternative methods of collaboration and constructivism will be presented. It is important to note that it is not the intent of this author to judge which teaching method is best, only to present these methods that are currently in use and allow the reader to judge for him/herself what method would work best in his/her online classroom.

Advantages of Online Courses

For the instructor who is trying to decide whether or not teach a course online come three questions: (1) Are computer-based courses as effective as traditional face-to-face classes? (2) What advantages do online courses offer to students? and (3) What benefits exist for students taking classes via the internet? According to Meyer (2002), much of the research on Web-based courses indicates that students do as well as or better than in traditional courses and are satisfied with their learning experiences. Navarro and Shoemaker state that the 1999 Journal of Computing in Higher Education reports that cyber learning can be as effective as traditional classroom learning (Brewer, DeJonge, & Stout, 2001). Several advantages to internet-based distance learning that support it's effectiveness over traditional courses include collaborative learning, expanded learning opportunities, and convenience (Hoffman, 2002). Also, Hoffman (2002) states that internet-based distance learning is more effective than classroom learning because internet-based students had no choice but to become active learners.

When asking students why they take classes online, Northrup (2002) reports that the top reason was the flexibility followed closely by convenience. In a study by McCall (2002), participants report that flexibility, convenience, and the ability to work at one's own pace were the primary reason influencing participation in an online course. Internet-based distance learning offers such advantages as convenient access, flexibility, equal student participation potential, student/instructor collaboration, and active learning opportunities (Hoffman, 2002). Also, there is

increased student control over the timing, place and pace of learning in the virtual classroom (Weisenberg, 1999).

Finally, when comparing students in computer-based courses to traditional courses, Velayo (2001) reports that students writing skills seemed to improve more when completing online courses. Virtual classrooms allow learners to take time to reflect, write and rewrite their contributions before offering them to the class discussion (Weisenberg, 1999). Weisenberg shares that his on-line teaching experiences have revealed that asynchronous, text-based learning environments can promote thoughtful self-reflection more readily than does a synchronous, face-to-face learning environment. Intriguing evidence also exists that online educational environments develop critical-thinking and writing skills and improve the transfer of learning (Meyer, 2002). Weisenberg (1999) tells us that research has shown that computer-based instruction helps the participants to learn "how to-learn skills" such as collaboration, problem-solving, information retrieval, and communication skills. It was generally found that using technology-based instruction not only allowed students to become more interactive with each other and the faculty during the course, but also increased student participation in team activities (Havice, Havice, & Isbell, 2000). Online environments provide both teachers and learners with access to more open forums of content and away from the rigid structures to which they have been accustomed. Students are encouraged to collaborate and work together. Students who may be too shy to speak out in class often do so comfortably in electronic discussions (Waterhouse, 2001). Also, learners become self-sufficient and cognizant of their own role in influencing what is learned (Oliver, 1999). According to Brewer et al. (2001) web-based learning supports cognitive skills development. Cognitive skills involve every level of Bloom's taxonomy and many web-based activities, including interaction with other learners can be used to enhance

cognitive learning.

Disadvantages of Online Courses

While internet based education has many advantages over traditional classrooms, it is not without it's problems. It is important that the first-time, online instructor be aware of these drawbacks in designing online courses and do everything possible to avoid or alleviate these pitfalls for both the instructor and the student. The challenges of computer mediated communication have been well documented and include; (a) technical frustration due to the total reliance on technology and outside support systems,(b) increased time-on-task due to the slowness of the medium and the higher volume of messages, which also contribute to the feelings of information overload; (c) frequency of miscommunication due to the loss of visual cues; and (d) disjointed flow of communication because of the asynchronous time frame (Weisenberg, 1999). Also, while it is true that online courses offer anytime, anyplace learning Spector (2001) states that the range of activities available in online settings and the multiple conditions of time in which they take place are evidence that the technology demands placed on online teachers are somewhat more significant than those associated with classroom teaching. Both teachers and students experience a dramatic increase in demands placed on them by all members of the class who now have 24 hour access to each other (Wiesenberg, 1999).

Since web based instruction involves a student sitting alone at a computer, on-line learning does not promote the campus experience (Guha, 2001). This hampers the student's ability to create new friendships and enhances the temptation to postpone coursework (Hoffman, 2002). Also, on-line instruction relies heavily on students' motivation (Guha, 2001). Finally, when internet-based students have problems, they typically have no one to turn to for help. Some problems are more readily resolved in person than they are via asynchronous communications

methods (Hoffman, 2002).

Guidelines for Teaching A Class Online

It is important for the first time, online instructor to note that the use of the internet has transformed student expectations. Students expect more feedback, more attention, and more resources to help them learn (Lansdell, 2001). Because of the technology, online courses have certain characteristics that are unique (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000). It takes careful planning, delivery, and feedback regarding pre-learning, learning activities, interactivity, and reflection for online learning to be successful (Berge, 2002). Because of the reliance on text-based communication and a lack of visual cues, every aspect of an online course has to be laid out in meticulous detail to avoid misunderstanding (Smith, 2001). Instructors should let the class know the expectations of the course as early as possible and be as specific as possible about requirements for projects and/ or papers (Rossman, 1999). Palloff and Pratt (2001) suggest that the instructor be clear about expectations and about how much time the course will require. Also, instructors should provide an explanation of the course materials, the organization of the course, a list of readings and assignments, priorities and deadlines, activities and evaluation, and the expectations and responsibilities of the student and instructor before learning begins (Berge, 2002; Schrum, 2000; Lansdell, 2001). This will help the student avoid the feeling of being lost or overwhelmed (Lansdell, 2001). Research by Lao (2002) concludes that several challenges such as frustration and misunderstandings are likely to occur if faculty and students do not have clear expectations of the class. Likewise, students must have clearly defined learning outcomes, or tasks so that they can orient themselves at any time (Lansdell, 2001). It is useful to use course guidelines as a first discussion item in class. Doing this enables students to take responsibility for the way they will engage in the course and with one another (Lansdell, 2001).

Interaction in an Online Course

Whether in a face-to-face classroom or in a distance learning course, teaching occurs when the teacher interacts with one of more learners. The first time, online instructor must realize that the more that he/she involves the students in the learning process online, the more likely they will be to achieve a successful learning outcome. (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Since on-line learning does not inherently offer students social interaction, or provide hands-on guidance from the course instructor, a carefully crafted teaching strategy is necessary to keep the instruction interesting (Guha, 2001). If the learning expected is required to go beyond the beginning stage of knowledge acquisition, the experiences must involve the learner and must allow for opportunities to interact with the information and with others including other learners and the teacher (Brewer et al., 2001). It is agreed that interaction must be designed into an instructional program and that it is an important variable for online learning. (Northrup, 2002). Phipps and Merisotis (2000) state that the process of interactivity, which includes interaction between students and faculty, students and students, and feedback to student assignments and questions, is critical for any type of learning.

Kodali (1999), in a study of online instructional strategies, reveals that student-focused instructional strategies, such as communicating with students, promoting interaction, giving feedback, facilitating discussion, creating learner-centered activities, and ensuring flexibility, are prominent in online course design and delivery. Berge (2002) states that research does indicate that interaction is important to distance learner satisfaction and the persistence of distance students. He also says that interaction is necessary to provide feedback and, thus, is central to the expectations of teachers and learners in education and to that extent, it is a primary goal of the educational process. Therefore, interaction will continue to be seen as a critical component of

formal education, regardless of whether there is research showing a direct link to increased effectiveness. Through discussion and interaction with others, students share their experiences, try out different ways of looking at their own experiences, and explore multiple perspectives and views that often conflict with their own (Berge, 2002). When students have the opportunity to interact with one another and their instructors, they can analyze, synthesize, and evaluate course content and use their new learning to construct a shared meaning of what they are learning in the context of their own community (Berge, 2002). As increased involvement and interaction occurs, learning begins to transcend acquisition of knowledge and skills to comprehension, application, analysis, and even synthesis. The teacher directs the learning experience and observes as students take charge of their own learning (Brewer et al., 2001).

An important and necessary component to successful web-based instruction is ongoing communication. This includes instructor-student communication, student-instructor communication, and student-student communication. (Cooper, 2002). An on-line course can be successful only if the instructor sets lines of communication with the students that are always open, and gives prompt attention (as much as is reasonable) to questions or concerns (Guha, 2001). One job of the instructor or facilitator is to interact with the learner to help fill or bridge the gaps the learner may face with the content and within the learner's other learner-directed social interactions. To aid in this, specific interactions must be designed to make sure feedback and evaluation are communicated to the learner (Berge, 2002). In a study by Northrup (2002) participants in online courses strongly stated that timely responses from peers and instructors were of utmost importance. Cultivation of a relationship between the instructor and the learner subsequently supports cultivation of a relationship between the learner and the content which, in turn, equips the learner to participate in meaningful collaboration with other learners (Brewer et

al., 2001). Additionally, increased interaction is a means by which students become empowered as learners, thereby taking charge of their own learning, and in fact lessening the "teaching" burden on faculty. (Pallof & Pratt, 2001).

It is the responsibility of the teacher to create a learning community among class members. Since learners do not meet face-to-face, they need to become acquainted with each other through initial introductions and through learning how to interact effectively and appropriately in this new medium (Kassworm, Polson, & Fishback 2002). The instructor should be a model for this interaction by providing an initial introduction of him or herself to the class and encouraging or requiring students to do the same. Cooper (2002) states that student-student communication can be done via listserve, threaded discussion, chat sessions, or discussion groups. Most students do not prefer chat groups with large numbers because chat groups have the potential to be dominated by the person who can type the fastest. Small group discussions may work best because students are more likely to discuss topics more freely, share their own experiences, and feel more a part of the class. Brewer et al. (2001) report that students generally prefer threaded discussions because they give them time to think about their responses first. Threaded discussions enable students to participate at a more comfortable pace and at times more convenient to their schedules. By using both synchronous and asynchronous communication, the instructor provides students with the opportunity to engage in the discussion format most convenient and comfortable to them (Brewer et al., 2002).

Role of the Instructor

Kassworm et al. (2002) state that it is evident that the instructor has significantly more responsibility for establishing specific structures and processes within a virtual classroom than in a regular classroom. For the first time, online instructor this means that he/she will become quite

different to his/her contemporaries in terms of roles and responsibilities (Oliver, 1999). According to Diamond (2002), a laissez-faire approach to on-line teaching seldom works, some degree of monitoring and feedback are essential to encourage student participation. Diamond suggests that instructors try to make their own messages to students models of good on-line writing – timely, succinct, to the point, respectful. Also, the instructor should be a good model of participation by logging on frequently and contributing to class discussions. Finally, the instructor must monitor students' completion of the assignment and provide on-line feedback to increase student interest and use (Diamond, 2002).

Likewise, the instructor must be actively involved in responding to student questions and assignments. Northrup (2002) reports results of a study that indicate that support from the instructor is a key attribute in the success of online learning. Participants report that timeliness of response is a major indicator of support (Northrup, 2002). Also, instructor feedback is important to maintain the focus of the learning activities. The instructor enhances the learning activities by facilitating through coaching, observing students, offering hints and reminders, providing feedback, and modeling (Lansdell, 2001 There must be opportunity for feedback in all forms, such as instructor-to student, student-to-instructor, and student-to-student throughout the online learning process (Berge, 2002). According to Berge (2002), communication, feedback, and evaluation are critical components of interactivity in online courses. Participants reported that instructors should make every attempt to provide some kind of feedback to them at least two times per week (Northrup, 2002). According to Phipps & Merisotis (2000) feedback to student assignments and questions must be constructive and provided in a timely manner. The instructor's feedback is critical to insure that students feel their contributions are an important priority and contribute to the overall educational experience of the class (Lansdell, 2001).

Evaluation in an Online Course

Just as the role of the instructor in an online course must change, the first time, online instructor must understand that the nature of online teaching requires the instructor to rethink the evaluation process. The evaluation component must be ongoing and continual (Schrum, 2000). For educators to develop a successful online course, multiple forms for assessing student work and/or performance must be created (Havice et al., 2000). Based on the experiences of Palloff and Pratt (2001), examinations may not be the best measure of student performance in the online environment. If examinations are not the best measure of evaluating student performance, then what alternate methods should be used? Palloff and Pratt suggest that students should be encouraged to comment on one another's work and self-evaluation should be embedded in the final performance evaluation of each student. For example, students are asked to provide feedback to one another on assignments and at the end, provide a descriptive evaluation of the performance of themselves and one another. This along with quality and quantity of participation and performance on assignments and in discussion are how Palloff & Pratt measure student performance. Havice et al. (2000) also believe that the dialog generated in an online course can be a rich source of formative evaluation material. Online courses provide the instructor with the ability to assign individual grades to student engaged in group work (de Caprariis, 2000). Instructors can monitor individuals' participation in group work by evaluating postings on group discussion sites and can assign grades accordingly.

Another alternative method for evaluating student performance in an online course is the use of rubrics. Rubrics provide an alternative to assessing or evaluating online student work and performance while fostering a sense of learner empowerment (Havice et al., 2000). The use of rubrics allows the educator to clarify the assessment criteria by which the student's work or

performance will be judged (Havice et al., 2000). Rubrics help to demystify or take the guesswork out of the expectations for a project, therefore empowering the student to focus on weak areas while emphasizing the strengths in his or her own work (Havice et al., 2000).

Methods for Teaching Online

The first time, online instructor must understand that there is no one-size-fits-all model for online instruction (Brewer et al., 2001). The key to success in an online class rests not with the content that is being presented but with the method by which the course is delivered (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). The effective online practitioner is an individual who is able to bring about intended outcomes in a consistent manner (Brewer et al., 2001). The quality of the learning experience and the instructional design play a major role in the successful use of electronic communication technology in education (Webb, 2001). Guha (2001) states that, as teachers, our aim is to enhance students' knowledge. Therefore, if an instructor adopts a teaching strategy that is interesting, challenging, and convenient to all parties, then true satisfaction will have been attained (Guha, 2001).

How the online instruction is set up can either facilitate or impede the learning process. The presentation of the online materials sets the tone. As much as possible, the instructor must monitor the appropriateness of how the content is being received in an attempt to ensure that the process of learning online is helpful rather than detrimental (Brewer et al., 2001). The prime criteria for assessment of effective teaching or training according to Brewer et al. are a positive correlation between intent and outcome. It must be noted that for successful learning experiences to occur, someone must first identify the level or type of learning to take place (Brewer et al., 2001). Online practitioners must be able to make solid decisions concerning (a) content selection, (b) appropriate involvement by participants, (c) demonstration that appropriate

learning has occurred, and (d) the presenter's role as facilitator of learning (Brewer et al., 2001). The primary challenge is to make online instruction meaningful, engaging, and as interactive as face-to-face instruction. Regardless of mode of delivery, instructional quality remains the responsibility of distance education faculty (Crumpacker, 2001). Different online practitioners may seek and achieve favorable outcomes using different techniques. All of those online practitioners would be judged effective (Brewer et al., 2001).

Using Traditional Classroom Methods

It is believed that the cyberspace classroom is no different from the face-to-face classroom and that approaches used face to face will surely work online. Many believe that all they need to do to teach online successfully is to "convert" the course material by placing content on a web-site (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Havice et al. (2000) report that according to Smith and Ragan (1999), the instructional design process remains more or less the same for traditional-based learning and distance learning environments. The major challenge then for the first time, online instructor is to make the transition to distance and distributed learning while providing the most effective delivery and assessment models. McPherson and Montelpare (2000) believe that the value of the on-line experience can only be realized if it is combined with the strengths of traditional curriculum delivery (McPherson & Montelpare, 2000). A study by Crumpacker (2001) reveals that the mode of delivery, whether traditional or asynchronous learning networks, does not result in any statistically significant differences in student performance success measures. Smith (1999) examined the effectiveness of traditional classroom teaching methods used in an online environment and found that the student performance was the same whether instruction was delivered in a traditional classroom or through an online learning environment.

According to de Caprariis (2000), traditional instructional methods produce similar academic outcomes when delivered through online learning environments. Therefore, no technique used in a traditional course should be considered sacrosanct and only those components that clearly contribute to the on-line learning environment should be retained in the design of a course using the new format.

Standard instructional design considerations are easily applied to on-line courses, but instructors must recognize that the manner in which things are done in a traditional classroom may have to be modified considerably (de Caprariis, 2000). The breakdown of activities may be appropriate for any kind of class, traditional or on-line, but it is very important when planning distance education courses because the strategies for on-line instruction will vary considerably from those used in a traditionally taught course (de Caprariis, 2000). Wiesenberg (1999) states that Hiltz, 1994 tells us that the most frequently cited distinctions between the traditional face-to-face and new virtual classroom are structural; speaking and listening in the traditional classroom versus typing and reading in the virtual classroom; everyone moving at the same speed versus self-paced; a set time versus anytime and anyplace; social interaction as inappropriate versus social interaction as appropriate at the discretion of the participants; recording responsibility being the students' versus the system's; and utilization of advanced technologies in learning versus a necessity.

Cooper (2002) reminds us that since students have different learning styles and respond differently to various learning activities, it is important to offer them instructional materials in a variety of formats. Students in a study by Northrup (2002) seemed to prefer a variety of techniques, yet seem to feel most comfortable with the "feeling" of a traditional class. Brewer (2001) takes traditional teaching techniques and shows how they can be adapted for online use.

These traditional techniques include lecture, demonstration, panel, group discussion, questioning, role-playing, case study and simulation. Cooper (2002) recommends lecture notes, assignments, automatically graded self-tests, answers to chapter questions, Power Point presentations that summarize the main points of the chapter or topic, online videos of class lectures, and links to textbook interactive websites may also be used. According to Foshay (2002), the most common recipe for asynchronous distance education is this: create text-based lectures, assign readings, add a few written assignments, and season with on-line discussions via chat rooms and e-mail.

If the instructor chooses to use traditional teaching methods for an online course, research shows that there are a few things the online instructor needs to consider. First, just as traditional classes need pace, it is also important online (Gerson, 2000). Second, it has been shown that few web users will read more than one screen of text. Consequently keeping it simple by using concise "chunks" of information is the best rule of thumb (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Third, chat is not well used to deliver lecture although many mistakenly believe that it is (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Fourth, many use streaming audio or video in online classes, which generally involves taping a professor delivering part of a lecture. Audio or video streaming segments may be added to emphasize material but should not be relied upon as the sole method of delivery (Brewer et al., 2001). Instead, online lectures should take the form of detailed outlines, power point slides, or simple HTML pages and may be interjected with visuals, direct quotes, and side trips to additional online sites. Windschitl (1999) reminds us that the question is not whether to use lecture or discussions, but how to use these techniques to complement rather than dominate student thinking.

Using Discussion as a Method for Online Instruction

Since the type of discussion that exits in a traditional classroom is missing in an online course, the first time, online instructor must plan to involve the students in discussion of content and issues. A strong association between extensive uses of on-line class discussion and reported learning outcomes for students is as good or better than those for the traditional classroom (Hiltz, Coppola, Rotter, & Turoff, 2000). As online discussion tools, such as chat rooms, threaded discussion, bulletin boards, and listservs, become more common for both individual and group interactions, dialog will develop into a more valid learning assessment approach. These online discussion tools can be used to encourage student participation in critiquing journal articles, facilitating team discussions, debating posted issues, and responding to online reference material (Havice et al., 2000). Timely on-line discussion can maintain the excitement of a special campus lecture (Diamond, 2002). Rossman (1999) finds that learners appreciate and seem to learn more from the responses of other students and that learners prefer discussion forums that encourage open and honest dialog. Therefore, faculty should encourage learners to pass on to one another any helpful hints they may have and a weekly summary of the class discussion should be posted for the prior week. Communication using asynchronous postings to the discussion forum allows learners to post at their convenience, which allows for a higher level of quality discussion (Rossman, 1999). It is the instructor's responsibility to design and maintain the discussion of an online course to ensure that it promotes learning. The instructor must be willing to step in and set limits if participation wanes or if communication is headed in the wrong direction (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). The instructor must also monitor the participation of students and make contact when there is a change or there is minimal or no participation (Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

Whittle, Morgan, and Maltby (2000) report that there are several reasons why online discussions may not facilitate learning and the first time, online instructor should be aware of

these. They include, inadequate discussion management strategies, poorly constructed discussion topics, non-existent or infrequent teacher feedback, irrelevant or negative feedback from teachers and peers and difficulty in sustaining the momentum of discussion. Synchronous discussion – or chat – does have its place in online courses in limited ways. In online synchronous discussions, the instructor must (1) establish ground rules for discussion, (2) animate interactions with minimal instructor intervention, (3) sense how online text messages may appear to distant learners, and (4) be aware of cultural differences (Spector, 2001). The major drawback with the use of chat is that individuals report frustration in keeping track of what others are typing. Additionally, one person who can type very rapidly is often able to dominate the conversation (Schrum, 2000).

Alternative Teaching Methods

According to Schofield (2001) the use of online technologies to facilitate learning requires a break with the past and the construction of a new more complex practice. When students are presented with an engaging, quality learning experience, they can make bridges between concepts and applicability, which leads to higher learning (Lansdell, 2001). If first time, online instructor wants to make a break from the use of traditional classroom instructional methods, what alternative methods are available? Schrum (2002) reveals that distance educators are incorporating active, collaborative, and constructivist learning strategies for their online classes rather than taking a traditional lecture model.

Asynchronous Learning and Collaboration

One of the two themes at the forefront of distance education delivery is Asynchronous Learning Networks (Crumpacker, 2001). Asynchronous (time-independent) text-based discussion is commonly incorporated in the delivery of online education (Whittle et al., 2000).

On the whole, using modern-day technology to build a collaborative, problem-based ALN online learning milieu whereby structure and dialog are optimized, can produce comparable results to those earned in traditional milieu (Weisenberg, 2001). In a study conducted by Hiltz, et al. (2000) quality learning via ALN is shown to be more likely when the student actively participates in on-line learning and the instructor uses collaborative, problem-based pedagogical strategies. Asynchronous communication aids the generation of knowledge as learners formulate their ideas in to words and builds these ideas through responses from others (Lansdell, 2001). Weisenberg (1999) says that his on-line teaching experiences have revealed that asynchronous, text-based learning environments can promote thoughtful self-reflection more readily than does a synchronous, face-to-face learning environment. A central argument of a paper by Whittle et al. (2000) is that, provided asynchronous text-based discussion is thoughtfully structured, it is an excellent vehicle for engaging students in meaningful online dialogue. According to Palloff and Pratt (2001) the asynchronous learning environment allows students the luxury of time for thought and reflection, which they believe enhances the learning environment. In the asynchronous mode, students can read assigned material, search out new, additional sources to compliment what is being studied, engage in lively discussion with one another and reflect on the material presented in the text, by the instructor and by peers. The result is a greater ability to make meaning out of the material under study and to engage with it. The extensive use of asynchronous discussion can provide the instructor with insights about students' learning that improved the instructors responsiveness in meeting students' needs for guidance and support, and resulted in a rewarding teaching experience (Whittle et al., 2000).

Rossman (1999) states that a document analysis of course evaluations from online classes offered at Capella University which use asynchronous learner discussion forum found that; (a)

learners want prompt feedback from faculty; (b) learners want specific feedback; and (c) learners prefer that negative comments be given privately, preferably through a phone call. To improve the instructional process, Rossman suggests the development of a group e-mail list for the class, sending weekly notes on class business and sending personal notes throughout the online course to simulate the informal chat that often occurs at the beginning of a traditional class. (Rossman, 1999). According to Zhu (2001) research results have found that success factors for asynchronous learning include whether students felt a part of the online learning group, immediate feedback from instructors, automatic self-test, and indicating student's performance and progress in the course.

The other theme at the forefront of distance education delivery is collaboration (Crumpacker, 2001). According to Crumpacker, collaboration is shown to be one of the best methods of learning via the distance. Weisenberg (2001) states that collaborative, problem-based ALN course design is a component to online learning success. Inasmuch as on-line instructors consider interaction valuable to the learning process, on-line collaboration, if proven effective and attainable, might be a suitable compromise and, therefore, the preferred method of on-line instruction (Crumpacker, 2001). Research findings support the view that embedding student collaboration and problem-based learning in asynchronous text-based discussion provides teachers with a powerful strategy to support students' active engagement with content and facilitates the development of high levels of conceptual understanding for students (Whittle et al., 2000). Northrup (2002) relates that promoting collaboration and conversation online is an attribute of online learning that participants considered important. Overall, according to Northrup, forming the community of learners, collaborating with peers, and getting feedback from the instructor were the most highly rated indicators of this attribute. The empirical evidence

presented in a paper by Hiltz, et al. (2000) suggests that when students are actively involved in collaborative learning on-line, the outcomes can be as good as or better than those for traditional classes and when individuals are simply receiving posted material and sending back individual work, the results are poorer than in traditional classrooms. According to Hiltz, et. al, most faculty who successfully used the group discussion and collaborative work aspects of ALN feel that students learned as much or more as in traditional classrooms. By contrast, if faculty members failed to structure activities, incentives, and encouragement so as to elicit online group discussion and work, they tend to feel that the experience was not as good, for either students or faculty, as in a traditional classroom learning at least as effective as the traditional classroom (Hiltz, et al., 2000).

Whether or not on-line classrooms are more collaborative depends on how the instructor designs and manages the course, which requires a different approach to structuring the class discussions, activities, and assignments than that usually taken in the traditional face–to-face classrooms (Weisenberg, 1999). Collaborative learning pedagogy shifts the focus from the teacher-student interaction to the role of peer relationships in educational success (Crumpacker, 2001). The use of collaboration depends upon factors such as the content of the course, the level of instruction (undergraduate vs graduate), and the values of the instructor (Phipps & Merisotis, 2000). Chang (2001) defines collaborative learning (as given by Salomon 1991) as containing three major components: sharing, interdependencies and involvement. The features for a collaborative learning strategy include heterogeneous grouping, interdependence, individual accountability, and group processing (Chang, 2001). Collaborative learning processes help students to achieve deeper levels of knowledge generation through the creation of shared goals, shared exploration, and a shared process of meaning-making (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). When

students share information, learning is facilitated in two ways; (1) the student is rehearsing and restructuring the knowledge while they develop their responses, and (2) the student receives evaluation and feedback from other students (Palloff & Pratt, 2001). Research findings support the view that embedding student collaboration and problem-based learning in asynchronous text-based discussion provides teachers with a powerful strategy to support students' active engagement with content and facilitates the development of high levels of conceptual understanding for students (Whittle et al., 2000). Foshay (2002) envisions a distance learning environment where collaborative learning and inductive problem-solving are at the core and also includes knowledge retrieval and direct (tutorial) instruction. The instructor's primary responsibilities, according to Foshay, include constructing and maintaining the core problems and the supportive knowledge map, and ensuring the integrity of tutorial and knowledge resources selected as resources.

Within the distributed learning environment, collaborative activities involving teams and groups can be effective strategies for enhancing the learning process (Havice et al., 2000). Group activities should be designed that allow learners to mutually explore and reflect on their experiences and that give them an opportunity to examine the implications of their learning for their multiple role (Kassworm et al., 2002). Chang (2001) has established guidelines for refining collaborative learning strategies to reduce the complexity of implementing them on the web. They include allowing the learners to divide themselves into heterogeneous groups by ranking each other. An instructor can ask every learner to answer a questionnaire about the other learners and then can use the ranking results to group learners. Instead of assigning roles to learners, the learners can recommend someone for the role. Then, according to Chang, the instructor can design daily routines for each role to maintain and every learner should be responsible for some

task that can only be executed by playing his/her role. The instructor needs only to announce the deadline of a collaborative learning activity and the groups will co-ordinate to achieve the instructor's goal (Chang, 2001). In spite of the geographical separation between members, virtual students become much more effective as learning groups when courses require them to work together collaboratively.

Constructivism

Delivering an on-line course can shift the focus from a traditional pedagogy to instruction within the constructivist paradigm (McPherson & Montelpare, 2000). The objectivist approach is often considered a "passive" learning method to the extent that each student is responsible for independently learning information contained in the body of objective knowledge while the instructor is responsible for facilitating the transfer of knowledge via presentation and explanation (Crumpacker, 2001). However, the constructivist approach is "active" in that each student is responsible for discovering, constructing, practicing, and validating acquired knowledge via active exploration and interactive social collaboration with others (Crumpacker, 2001). A basic tenet of constructivist theory is that learning is a process of conceptual change whereby individuals construct new understandings of reality (Whittle et al., 2000). Windschitl (1999) describes the fundamental ideas of constructivist learning as: (1) that students' background knowledge profoundly affects how they interpret subject matter, (2) that students learn best when they apply their knowledge to solve authentic problems, (3) that students engage in "sense-making" dialogue with their peers, and (4) that they strive for a deep understanding of core ideas rather than recall a laundry list of facts. Berge (2002) relates that constructivist environments engage learners in the construction of knowledge through collaboration and individual activities that embed the learning of salient knowledge and skills in meaningful

contexts, and through reflection on what has been learned through interaction with content and other people. Winschitl (1999) states that constructivism is more than a set of teaching techniques; it is a coherent pattern of expectations that underlie new relationships between students, teachers, and the world of ideas. If practices that have been associated with constructivism, like cooperative learning and hands-on experiences are simply inserted as special activities into the regular school day, then it remains business as usual for the students. Constructivism, according to Windschitl is premised on the belief that learners actively create, interpret, and reorganize knowledge in individual ways. The ideal situation according to Berge (2002) is for independent learners to take what they have learned and apply it, making meaningful in the context of actions and interaction within their own lives as they seek personal satisfaction, credentials, and advancement on their life path.

Constructivism involves students in authentic projects and problem-solving situations, the heart of which is inquiry (Berge, 2002). The essence of inquiry, according to Berge, is when the student is personally challenged with a problem to solve, a project to complete, or a dilemma to resolve. This challenge, it is hoped, causes the inquiry to be personally meaningful for the student and through individual or group investigations, the student's curiosity leads to explicit formulation of the subject to be investigated and the process that will be used for solving the problem or project (Berge, 2002). With respect to instruction, the constructivist belief suggests that students should participate in experiences such as problem-based learning, inquiry activities, dialogues with peers and teachers that encourage making sense of the subject-matter, exposure to multiple sources of information, and opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding in diverse ways (Windschitl, 1999).

Problem-based activities, according to Windschitl (1999), exemplify another core value of the

constructivist culture - collaboration. Students should have some latitude in choosing problems or designing projects that relate to the theme under study and often students determine with the teacher the suitable criteria for problems and for evidence of learning (Windschitl, 1999). Windschitl states that constructivist teachers must employ a range of strategies as they support individual students' learning such as scaffolding (in which the task required of the learner is strategically reduced in complexity), modeling, coaching, guiding, and advising. Effective forms of constructivist instruction includes assessment techniques such as journals, research reports, physical models, or plays and requires well-designed, flexible rubrics to maintain a link between course objectives and student learning (Windschitl, 1999).

Conclusion

Teaching courses online can be a challenging and rewarding experience. While it has been proven that students learn as much in an online course as they do in a traditional, face-to-face classroom, the first time, online instructor must design the course in such a manner to facilitate learning. This includes paying special attention to setting specific course guidelines, promoting interaction with and among students, and selecting appropriate evaluation tools. Traditional classroom methods such as lecture or discussion may be used effectively in an online course, but may have to be modified considerably. Other teaching methods such as collaboration and constructivism will allow the learner to take a more active role in the learning process and can be readily used in an online course.

It is important for the first time, online instructor to note that the methods for online teaching presented in this paper are by no means an exhaustive list of all available teaching methods for online courses. Whether or not a method is appropriate for a particular online course, according to Roberts & Jones (2000) depends on a variety of factors. These factors include the type of

subject matter, the competencies and personal preferences of the instructor, and the prior experiences of the students. Ultimately, the first time, online instructor must remember that it is pedagogy not technology that is critical to the success of an online course (Palloff & Pratt, 2001).

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